



Language Arts Challenge Digital Storytelling Unit

*Community Signage: Words in the Environment and
the Story they Tell*

Designed for Middle and High School Students

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Introduction

This Digital Story Telling Challenge will take two to four weeks to complete. This Challenge targets key Human Life Skills – creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, digital literacy and presentational skills – in equal measure with the curricular content. Delivering on all those learning goals requires student immersion and time. The results, as based on our research, are a high level of student engagement, deep learning, and 100% teacher endorsement.

The following Challenge:

- Should be completed by collaborative teams of two to four students but can be completed independently, if desired.
- Is aligned to nationally recognized Curricular Standards.
- Contains an Evaluation Rubric that allows the teacher to clearly score and appraise the students' work.
- Is designed to be integrated into the classroom in alignment with existing curricula.
- Can be assigned as an extra credit project to teams of students that you think would benefit from this kind of immersive, deep learning experience. Additionally, will work well in informal educational settings.
- Should follow the rules of Digital Citizenry in their proper usage and/or citation of images, music and text taken from other sources. See the Digital Rules area in the free Media Resources section of the Meridian Stories site for guidance.

The [Media Resources](#) section also contains many other **free support materials** from short videos featuring professionals in the field – Artists and Innovators– to short written documents that cover everything from storyboarding to creative brainstorming, interviewing techniques to game design.

While it is helpful to have a Technology Integrator involved, they are not usually necessary: the students already know how to produce the media. ***The teacher's primary function in these Challenges is to guide the students as they engage with the content. You don't need to know editing, sound design, shooting or storyboarding: you just need to know your content area.***

At the end of the Challenge, it is often fun and useful to have a screening of all the media productions – they are all designed to run under 4 minutes each. Students can vote for their favorite videos that can then be screened in a larger assembly-like setting for the whole grade to see. Or this work can be presented as part of a student

showcase for parents and friends. Presentational Skills is another Human Life Skill that this project enables.

Our research indicates this to be a really useful exercise for two additional reasons:

1. Students actually learn from their peers' presentations – it is useful to hear a perspective that is not just the teacher's; and
2. The public setting – painful as it is for some students – provides them with an opportunity to 'own' their work and to be more accountable.

Finally, if you are interested to learn more about the community of schools who annually participate in the [Meridian Stories Competitions](#) – a community that is characterized by a friendly competitive spirit; feedback from Mentors on each submission; and the rewarding of digital badges in content, storytelling and digital literacy – please return to the Competitions section of the website or inquire at info@meridianstories.com.

Let's get started.

The Challenge

There are words everywhere around you. Seriously. Think about it: store signs; 'no parking' signs; political ads lining lawns; street names; traffic signs; notices; marquees ...the list goes on. In this Meridian Stories Challenge, we ask you to explore your community through the signage that pervades the environment. This is also an exploration in words and how they are used to direct us; to warn us; to sell to us; and to surround us. In short, this Challenge asks you to really look at how the signage – the public display of language around your community – helps to create your community.

Go around town. Take pictures or short videos of the words and phrases that strike you. Does your community have a sense of humor – like the sign that was recently posted outside a coffee shop: "A yawn is a silent scream for coffee." Are there names that simply don't make sense in a nearby street sign: "Flying Point Road"? What's a 'flying point'? Part of this Challenge involves looking up the histories of a few select words. Even the signage announcing the name of your town - Norridgewock, Maine anyone? - has meaning and shapes your community.

The resulting video is a montage of the words and phrases that you have selected. Find or create some music to go with your photo/video montage. And lastly, write a

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voice over that communicates to your audience what it is you discovered about your community, as understood through the lens of the words, phrases and signs that pervade its very existence. And keep in mind the negative space in this Challenge: the lack of words.

Deliverables include:

- Community Signage Video
- Thematic Summary (at teacher’s discretion)
- First Draft Script (at teacher’s discretion)

Process

Below is a suggested breakdown for the students’ work.

During Phase I, student teams will:

- The first step is pure exploration. As a team, travel around your community and select words and signs to photo/video. We recommend that you do this together so that you can all experience the same signage and start your discussion about what is significant/important/humorous/useful, and what isn’t. This trip around town can be done on foot or bicycle. And this is the first of several signage explorations. This is all about initial discovery.
- Catalogue your words/phrases recordings – what do you have? Do the words leave an overall impression? Is there a theme? Can you re-arrange the words to tell a silly or interesting story, or even a sentence? This is your first community signage review.
- Brainstorm as a team where you want to go next. Might you want to explore the signage in your school more? A local store, bodega or community center? A church or fire station? Town Hall or a diner? Graffiti? You are looking for signage that reflects your community – we are not looking to catalogue the food sale signs at the chain supermarket.
- We recommend that this time you assign each member of your team two or three places to explore and then go out separately to shoot more signage.
- Come back together to catalogue and share your words.
 - Keep in mind that for your final video product, it’s not just the words themselves, it’s how they are presented visually. Are they thoughtfully and graphically presented? Are they pleasing to look at or just simple fonts in black and white? Words can be art unto themselves, so keep an eye out for signs-as-art: they could be fun to include in your final product.

- Organize your words. How do you do this? You can type them all up and cut them out and move them around into thematic groupings. Or try to create sentences with them: does a story evolve? Are there key words that you want to pull out, around which you may want to create your narrative? As noted above, it's great to see the actual words as they are presented in the signs, so you may want to find a way to print out the visual words.
 - This step is just about searching for the narrative; the way in which these words will cohere. However, you may want to shoot this step so that we can see what you're working with and how you begin to organize the signage.
- Research key words. Choose anywhere from 5 – 10 words and research their derivations or histories. Single words and phrases all have stories behind them. Discover the story behind 'Flying Point Road' or 'Starbucks,' 'Pershing Square' or 'Baxter Building'. In digging up these stories, your community will begin to reveal unknown layers to you.
- Brainstorm: what do your words tell you? This is the hardest part of this Challenge right here – finding meaning out of this hodgepodge of words that you have collected. The question you are answering is simply this: 'What story are these words and phrases telling you about your community?' And if the word 'story' is a tad overwhelming, then answer this: 'What are these words telling you about the community – the neighborhood, the apartment building, the region – in which you live?'
 - Here's the important thing: there is no right or wrong. The meaning is what you discover out of what you have collected. If you haven't collected words and phrases very thoughtfully and deliberately, the meaning will be hard to find. If you have, however, stories and themes and ideas will reveal themselves to you. And don't forget that words around town can be funny! Maybe just telling a funny story using the words that you see around you tells the world all they need to know about your community.
 - ***Teacher's Option: Thematic Summary*** – Teachers may require that teams hand in a one page brief that outlines their signage discoveries to date and the themes that they have discerned.

During Phase II, student teams will:

- At this point, your team should have a sense of what you want your words to communicate about your community. But this is the perfect time to get an outside perspective. We recommend sharing your words and word clusters

(perhaps not your thematic ideas) with friends and family outside of your group – what do they see? They will have a very different relationship to and history with the community, so they will, perhaps, make connections that you are not able to see. Take notes

- Outline in detail – perhaps even a rough script – the story you want to tell; the ideas about your community you want to communicate.
 - Keep this in mind. You don't have to tell THE story about your community. You could just tell A story.
- At this point, you have all this footage with all these words, and you have clear ideas about how to connect this footage into some kind of engaging narrative. It's time to create the film. There is no right or wrong way to create this film – this format doesn't really exist. But there are two approaches that we want to share that may get you started.
 - Tell a story using only the words from your town. So with each word you speak, there is a visual word – as shot in your community – to accompany it. Add some background music and you have yourself a short film where we are literally seeing and hearing each word of your story, organized in a way that communicates meaning.
 - Take a documentary style. Cut together the words in a way that reflects your core ideas. Write a VO – voice over – that explains what it is we are seeing; what it is that your team saw in this collection of words. Match the VO to the imagery. This is often done best by using a storyboard approach, clustering X number of word visuals to a given sentence or idea. See Meridian Support Resources for more help on storyboarding.
- Once you have decided on your digital storytelling approach, draft your script.
 - **Teacher's Option: First Draft Script** – Teachers may require that teams hand in a draft script for review and feedback.

During Phase III, student teams will:

- Finalize the script
- Finalize the storyboard.
- Record the Voice Over or script.
- Create a 'rough cut' that marries the visuals to the sound.
- Finalize the video – what's called 'picture lock'.
- Post-produce the video, adding music and sound effects as desired.

Meridian Support Resources

Meridian Stories provides two forms of support for the student teams:

1. Meridian Innovators and Artists – This is a series of three to four-minute videos featuring artists and innovative professionals who offer important advice, specifically for Meridian Stories, in the areas of creativity and production.
2. Media Resource Collection – These are short documents that offer student teams key tips in the areas of creativity, production, game design and digital citizenry.

Recommended review, as a team, for this Challenge include:

Meridian Innovators and Artists	Media Resource Collection
<i>On Memoir and Non-Fiction Writing</i> – Liza Bakewell <i>On Sound Design</i> – Chris Watkinson <i>On Photography</i> – Michael Kolster <i>On Editing</i> – Tom Pierce	“Creating a Short Documentary” “Producing: Time Management” “Creating Storyboards, Framing a Shot” “Guide to Royalty Free Music and Sound Effects”

Evaluation Rubric - *Community Signage*

CONTENT COMMAND	
Criteria	1 - 10
Word Choices	The words culled from the community are interesting and insightful
Word Organization	Your organization of the words communicates insight about the community
Historical Word Research	Historical research of select words is substantive and relevant
STORY COMMAND	
Criteria	1 - 10
Community Narrative	The verbal and visual words insightfully communicate a wonderful and inventive story

Creative Approach	Your creative approach to organizing the content into a video narrative was thoughtful, inventive, and engaging
MEDIA COMMAND	
Criteria	1 - 10
Visual Presentation of the Words	The presentation of the community signage was creative and visually coherent
Sound Design	The mix of music and sound greatly enhanced the goals of the video
HUMAN SKILLS COMMAND	
Criteria	1 - 10
Collaborative Thinking	The group demonstrated flexibility in making compromises and valued the contributions of each group member
Creativity and Innovation	The group brainstormed many inventive ideas and was able to evaluate, refine and implement them effectively
Initiative and Self-Direction	The group set attainable goals, worked independently and managed their time effectively, demonstrating a disciplined commitment to the project

Essential Questions

1. How much visual language comprises your actual environment – at home, school, and in your community?
2. What are the (hi)stories behind select words – how they came to be *and* how they came to be *in* your community?
3. How do you find meaning/make meaning – story, history, perspective, direction – from language that you have collected (in your community)?
4. How much do you know about the history of your community?
5. How has immersion in the creation of original content and the production of digital media – exercising one’s creativity, critical thinking and digital literacy skills - deepened the overall educational experience?
6. How has working on a team – practicing one’s collaborative skills - changed the learning experience?

Student Proficiencies

1. The student will gain a greater awareness about all the environmental print that shapes our visual landscapes.
2. The student will understand that words are living entities with histories, that evolve and change with time and context.
3. The student will learn how to create/extract thematic connections from language where it was not clearly evident.
4. The students will gain a greater awareness about the history of their community.
5. The student will utilize key Human Skills, with a focus on creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy, in their process of translating their encounter with local language into a narrative about community.
6. The student will have an increased awareness of the challenges and rewards of team collaboration. Collaboration – the ability to work with others - is considered one of the most important Human Skills to develop in students as they prepare for life after secondary school.

Curricular Correlations

The *Community Signage* Challenge addresses a range of curricular objectives that have been articulated by the new **Common Core Curricular Standards – English Language Arts**. Below please find the standards that are addressed, either in whole or in part.

Common Core Curricular Standards – English Language Arts Standards

<i>Standards</i>	<i>8th</i>	<i>9th / 10th</i>	<i>11th / 12th</i>
RI4 READING: INFORMATIONAL TEXTS Craft and Structure	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

W2 WRITING Text Types and Purpose	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
W6 WRITING Production and Distribution of Writing	Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others.	N/A	N/A
SL1 SPEAKING AND LISTENING Comprehension and Collaboration	Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.	Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.	Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
L4 LANGUAGE	Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words or phrases based on <i>grade 8 reading and content</i> , choosing flexibly	Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on <i>grades 9-10 reading and content</i> ,	Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on <i>grades 11-12 reading and content</i> ,

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use	from a range of strategies.	choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.	choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
L5 LANGUAGE Vocabulary Acquisition and Use	Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.	Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.	Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.